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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: South Africa may reintroduce culling to manage its expanding elephant population

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Summary

1. (SBU) South Africa is working to identify an acceptable solution to the problem of elephant overpopulation in its national parks. An October conference with stakeholders held at Kruger National Park reviewed different elephant management methods, including relocation, contraception and culling. Culling appeared to be the most favored option despite concerns from animal rights activists. The country's park service will make policy recommendations to the government in 2005 and culling is likely to be part of the final plan for elephant management. In the meantime, Kruger will be demarcated into several zones in an effort to protect the park's biodiversity from the growing numbers of elephants. End Summary.

Elephant culling is emotional issue

2. (SBU) Wanda Mkhutshulwa, Head of Communications at the South African National Parks (SANParks), told ES&T Assistant that the country's elephant population is approximately 20,000. The Kruger National Park (KNP) is home to over 12,000 of these elephants, a rapid increase from under 7,000 in 1995. KNP can accommodate only 7,500 elephants comfortably, so the current population is well above "capacity." The remaining elephants are scattered in other parks around the country. Ms. Mkhutshulwa stressed that culling is a highly emotional and sensitive subject, and that SANParks is treating it as such.

Elephant numbers grow, have negative impact

3. (U) According to conservationists, elephants do not have any natural enemies in the wild and are well protected from poaching in the parks in South Africa. Elephants are also not susceptible to diseases and have a long lifespan. As a result, their numbers can only increase. According to Mkhutshulwa, ten years ago the South African government discontinued population control by culling. Since then elephant numbers have swelled, creating serious problems for humans, fauna and flora. She said that conservationists and scientists agree that elephants are overgrazing the park land, to the detriment of other species. They also destroy trees, some of which take long to reach maturity, or are a very rare species.

4. (U) SANParks is also concerned with the impact of elephants on the environment. Mkhutshulwa cited the example of Maphungubwe National Park, a world heritage site in Limpopo province. She said the park has only about 50 elephants, but their impact on the vegetation is very visible. The park had three forests of Ilala palm, a rare palm family species, in its natural habitat. Elephants destroyed two of the forests, and the remaining forest survived only because it is enclosed in a private property. Local communities living in the vicinity of the parks have also complained about the elephants breaking through fences and raiding crop fields and the drinking holes of livestock. Escaped elephants also pose a threat to nearby inhabitants, and the fences broken by the elephants can also result in other dangerous predators escaping, a threat to humans and livestock.

Stakeholders discuss options to manage growing elephant population

5. (SBU) SANParks hosted a conference in the KNP in October 2004, to discuss various elephant population control and management methods. National laws require all-inclusive consultations on national park policies that affect stakeholder groups. Over 200 interested and affected parties, including academics, scientists, local community members, NGOs and the government, represented by Department

of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, attended the conference. Although the participants reached no final decision on how to downsize the elephant numbers, according to Mkhutshulwa, most supported culling. She said that five breakaway groups discussed different approaches to the problem, and three supported culling, one objected, while the last group was indecisive. Culling, which involves selective elimination of elephants for conservation purposes, was perceived to be the most viable and reasonably humane option to adopt.

Alternative options considered weak, less effective

16. (SBU) Animal rights groups and other stakeholders attending the conference suggested alternative management methods such as contraception, translocation to parks in Africa or other foreign countries showing an interest. SANParks did not dismiss such suggestions, but it has a responsibility to provide an effective solution to the problem as soon as possible. Mkhutshulwa said that contraception is a slower-acting and more expensive method. She said elephants that have been relocated to another country, such as Mozambique, have walked back to their old habitat in South Africa. Some countries eligible for relocation do not want the elephants, as they too have elephant overpopulation. Zimbabwe has 80,000 while Botswana has 120,000 elephants, according to Mkhutshulwa. South Africa does not want to repeat the mistake of allowing the elephant population to reach such great proportions.

17. (SBU) SANParks' view is that because elephants are such free ranging animals, South Africa would appear irresponsible if it were to relocate them to countries where they will be confined to captivity. It would also be traumatic for elephants to be deprived of the freedom they have had all their lives, especially the older ones. Translocation is costly and is not expected to make a big impact on the existing numbers. A scientist at the conference said that exporting the elephants to places as far away and foreign as West Africa would be like sending the elephants to another planet, where they would struggle to adapt. Also, the elephant species found in West Africa are different from their Southern African relatives of the savannah grassland. Security is another problem, as it is not clear that the elephants can be sufficiently protected. According to Mkhutshulwa, most options have serious limitations.

SANParks responsible for efficient park management

18. (SBU) South Africa's Protected Areas Act stipulates that SANParks' management policy must be approved by the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism. SANParks is responsible for efficient management of the country's national parks, and if it fails to deliver, the government can transfer responsibility to another entity. Mkhutshulwa said that SANParks is also planning to divide the KNP into different zones so that the impact of the elephants on the park's biodiversity can be better controlled. According to Mkhutshulwa there will be a high impact absorbing area in the center of KNP, low impact areas and specific protected vegetation areas, where elephants would be kept out to protect the plants. As a signatory to the Convention on Biodiversity, SANParks believes South Africa cannot afford to be seen losing species through poor park management.

19. (SBU) Mkhutshulwa said that culling is not likely to encourage poaching because KNP management had almost eliminated poaching in the last ten years. Most of the policing work is done through intelligence methods involving community participation. If communities stand to benefit from saving the parks and protecting wildlife, they will not tolerate poaching or allow it to occur. The law also imposes very stringent penalties against transgressors, which is another deterrent.

Next steps by South African government

10. (SBU) Following the elephant management conference, SANParks plans to hold bilateral meetings with interested parties for further deliberations. SANParks will formulate policy recommendations to be presented to the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism by April 2005. The Minister will then publish the policy document for public comment before making a final decision on whether or not to cull. If the Minister approves a recommendation to cull, the government will consult relevant stakeholders and appoint an ethics committee for advice on specific culling methods. The stakeholders and the committee members will be invited to witness the culling to ensure that the animals do not suffer. SANparks officials will apply agreed-upon best practices in culling elephants, which have a higher level of intellect and consciousness relative to other animals.

Tusks recovered from any culling will be added to the national stockpile stored at the KNP, while the skins and meat will be sold to the local communities.

Comment

11. (SBU) Elephant culling stirs emotions in South Africa and around the world. SANParks is carefully balancing the concerns and emotions of stakeholders on the culling issue with its responsibility to manage biodiversity in national parks. We expect the final, well-debated decision to include an option of culling.

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